

Pipa 琵琶

Pipa is plucked stringed instrument, which is lute-shaped with four strings and a fretted soundboard of 30(or 31) frets. The word “pipa” is made up of two Chinese characters – “琵琶” “pi” and “琶” “pa”. These two Chinese characters describe how the instrument is played and the sounds it produced: the forward plucking of the string using one’s right hand was termed “pi”, and the backward plucking of the string with the right hand was termed “pa”. The player wears artificial fingernails made of bone, shell of some special nylon, which are bound by surgical tape onto the flesh of his fingers to pluck at the instrument. Its techniques are applied to almost every plucked stringed instrument and its concepts have been borrowed for the reformations of various plucked stringed instruments.

Tuning:

The symbols of Pipa’s four strings are:

x----the forth and thickest string;

三----the third string;

II----the second string;

I----the first and thinnest string.

()----a free string.

There are various ways of tuning for Pipa. The most common tuning is (from the forth string to first one):

A, d, e, a,

The others tuning can also be:

G, d, e, a;

A, b, e, a;

A, d, a, a;

B, d, e, a;

#A, #d, e, a;

.....

You can also create your own tuning for Pipa. The most common tuning is A-d-e-a.

Pipa has a range of A-e3, all semitones can be played.



Techniques and tonal colour:

In Pipa performance, symbols take on a special significance. Unlike most other instruments that have a few symbols, the Pipa’s symbols number in the hundreds. Each symbol defines and explains the technique that is used in the piece. These symbols, which are evolutions of

calligraphy, are recognized by all Pipa players.

Numbers beside the note are used to instruct fingerings according to how the piece to be played. Symbols at the bottom of a note tell the performer which string to use.

The symbols involve **string symbols**, **right hand symbols** and **left hand symbols**.

String symbols:

x----the forth and thickest string;

三----the third string;

II----the second string;

I----the first and thinnest string,

()----the free string.

When scored, the string symbols are written below a note.

Basic Right hand techniques and symbols:

1.\ (tan, 弹) and / (tiao, 挑)

They are the basic right hand techniques of Pipa playing.

\ (tan, 弹), which is used forefinger to flick one single string outwards from right to left from the player's viewpoint, producing a single sound. Sound textures vary, depending on how the string is plucked. Sounds can be solid, weak, soft, forceful, loose, tight, gentle, loud, thick and thin among other textures.

/ (tiao, 挑), which is used thumb to pluck one single string from left to right from the player's viewpoint, producing a single sound. Like \ (tan, 弹), the sound textures of / (tiao, 挑) produced are mainly depending on the way of playing.

\ and / are always played as a combination technique. They are not only producing single sounds, but also producing tremolo when the playing is fast and continuous.

Besides producing the single sound, \ and / can not only play one single string, but also play two or three or four strings at the same time with one plucking movement. The same when tremolo is played. Thus, interval (\ shuangtan, 双弹 and // shuangtiao, 双挑, chord or tone cluster (扫, ^扫sao,

扫 and ^拂fu, 拂) is produced. (When notated, sometimes it's unnecessary to notate the symbols of \ or /, the player will organize the order of playing naturally according to the notes and beats.)

\ or / can also play arpeggios when it's played slowly and continuously to pluck from the inner strings to the outer strings one by one or backwards.

\ and / are played with the outer side of player's false nail. The inner side of false nails can also produce sounds. It's similar to guitar's playing. The pluck with the forefinger nail's inner side is “ (” (mo, 抹) and the pluck with the thumb nail's inner side is “ (” (gou, 勾) .

The combination of \ and / is / \ (fen, 分), which executed on two different strings to achieve a single sound. The combination of (and) is () (zhe, 摭), which executed on two different strings to achieve a single sound. () and / \ can be played alternately and continuously in Moderato speed.

2. 𠄎 (lun, 轮)

𠄎 is the other unique and basic technique of Pipa. Forefinger, middle finger, ring finger and last finger flick outwards from right to left in order, while the thumb picks the string from left to right. This is a basic cycle of a 𠄎 ((lun, 轮) and the perspective of right and left is from the player's viewpoint. 𠄎 (lun, 轮) produces continuous tremolos of varying speeds and sound textures.

𠄎 can be played as a combination of two or more cycles joined together to produce tremolo for certain beats as more as the composer wants.

𠄎 can not only play on one single string, but also on two or three of four strings.

Accent or accents (\ or // or  or ) can be added while * is playing. The forefinger or thumb plays \ or // or 扫 or 拂, while the other fingers continue with * on a single string. The * cycle then goes back to normal. This technique is usually used to signify that a loud * is required.

Basic left hand techniques and symbols:

As others stringed instruments and lute family instruments, the left hand techniques of Pipa include vibrato, portamento, pizzicato, harmonics and artificial harmonics as well. Besides, the most important, unique and expressive technique of left hand for Pipa is **string-bending**.

The way of string bending is that the player's left finger presses the string on one fret, then pluck by right hand. With the resonant of the note played by right hand just now, left finger which is pressing the string begin to push inwards or pull outwards along the fret to raise the pitch of the string. The string which is always pressed on the fret by left finger can be also returned to the normal position if needed and the pitch's returning from higher to original can also be heard if the resonant is enough. The sound is similar to portamento or glissando. However, **string-bending** can only be raised the pitches but not reduce and then returned to original while portamento of glissando can be backwards also.

↗ and ↘ are symbolized for **string-bending**.

Glissando symbolized with half-arrow

厉音 Li-Yin put one string(the first one usually) in between two fingers, doing the gliss movements, sounds like the Hawaii guitar.

Harmonics and artificial harmonics

None-musical techniques:

1. 𠄎 (pai., 拍)

The sound is like Bartok pizzicato. There are two ways of playing. One is plucking string with thumb upwards and releases. The other way is picking up string and let it go with thumb and forefinger.

2. 𠄎 (zhai, 摘)

Thumb presses against string while the forefinger or middle finger flicks outwards from right to

left below the thumb. The sound produced is crisp, like thin metal stick being hit on percussion instruments. With the difference among the strings, pressure and positions, the obscure different pitches will be obtained.

3. 卜 (tan-mian-ban, 弹面板)

Forefinger or thumb uses surface of nails to hit surface of the board.

4. 丩 (sha, 煞)

Fingernail of left finger stays under the string while the right hand plays, producing the sound that is not purely musical. The obscure pitches can be changed while left fingernail moves the position.

5. **string-twisting**

Twisting two, three or four together (possibly the first string under the second or vice versa), and plucking with the right hand. The sound of **string-twisting** is alike beating cymbals. The different position of left finger can produce obscure pitches also like the other non-musical techniques.

Edited by Lan Weiwei